

Iowa Outdoors

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

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FALL FISHING IS TOUGH TO BEAT

DES MOINES – Fall is a great time to be outdoors. The air is cool, the bugs are gone, and the fish are pulling out of their late summer slumber. It is “One last time” to dust off the fishing rod before ice locks in the lakes for another winter.

“October and November are some of the best times to fish in Iowa because the fish are actively feeding getting ready for next spring,” said Marion Conover, chief of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources’ fisheries bureau. “Fish are developing their egg sacks now which requires them to eat a lot, plus they are eating to fatten up for the winter, which is good news for anglers.”

Another benefit to fall fishing is cooler water temperatures. Fish are more active during the day and can be caught close to shore.

“I’ve been getting reports from anglers who have done well fishing in shallow water during the day for walleye, crappie and bluegills,” he said. “Fall is also a great time to fish for muskies and northern pike.”

Three Mile Lake, in southwest Iowa, has a reputation of an excellent place to catch muskies in the fall. Another lake producing good muskie numbers is Brushy Creek, near Lehigh. Walleye fishing is also improving at Spirit Lake, West Okoboji Lake in many of the rivers in northeast Iowa.

In some of the shallow natural lakes in northern Iowa, northern pike are beginning to turn up in angler baskets. Bluegill and crappie fishing is also improved in many area

lakes. Check the traditional springtime haunts for panfish in the fall. And trout in many scenic Northeast Iowa streams will continue to be stocked through November.

“Fall fishing is a little different than spring fishing in that you won’t catch quite the numbers of fish as in the spring, but, overall, the fish tend to be larger,” Conover said.

Conover said he prefers to use live bait, namely minnows, in the fall to match the natural food the fish are targeting. But, artificial lures and night crawlers can also produce fish.

“The fall colors, migrating ducks and geese – you just can’t beat a fall day on the water,” he said.

FALL BIRD FEEDING AND MIGRATION

By Joe Wilkinson

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

It makes an odd sight. As I watch a hummingbird zip away from the bright red feeder in the yard this week, a southbound ‘V’ of geese honks overhead. Too low to be migrating, the Canadas—with a single snow goose fourth in line--were most likely just flying out to feed. Still, the conflicting visual; a delicate nectar-sipper from summer and the hardy autumn waterfowl, underscores the crossroads that is October in Iowa.

Trees shed piles of leaves after last week’s heavy frost; a hint of what’s to come. Yet mild temperatures now make it shirtsleeve weather. But the birds know. Flocks of blackbirds move like clouds across unpicked cornfields. Walking down to Coralville Reservoir, and I watch pelicans, cormorants, gulls and other shorebirds and waterfowl staging here, before moving south. Even across the backyard, activity is increasing. The push toward winter is on.

“I’ve seen some ruby-crowned kinglets over the last couple weeks. The first of the purple finches are reminders, too,” offers Pat Schlarbaum, from the Department of Natural Resources wildlife diversity program. “Purple finches are common winter migrants here. Juncos are starting to show up, too.” While most birds are just migrating through, looking for warmer climes, others have reached their winter destination, by the time they hit your backyard.

Birdfeeding in the United States is a \$2.2 billion industry. If you are among the tens of thousands of Iowans who feed birds through the winter, it is not too early to start attracting them now. “Now is when birds establish their winter feeding circuit,” explains Schlarbaum. “These are northern birds that are ‘replacing’ some of Iowa’s nesting

season birds; but some stick around, too. By showing food in your feeders now, they will know where to target as natural food sources are depleted or covered with snow.”

Though more of us feed year round, Ronda Wilson from Wildlife Habitat in Coralville, says the fall trek from seasonal bird feeding fans has begun. For beginners? “You can buy a good sunflower seed hopper/feeder for ten dollars and up,” says Wilson. “The die-hard bird feeding veterans, though, are more likely to get the more expensive feeders. If it breaks, they can replace it free.” She says a 25-pound bag of black oil sunflower seed is available for less than \$8. “Sunflower seed is still the best. It has a high fat content. The shells are easy to break. It attracts the highest variety of songbirds and clinging birds.”

Knowing what to feed—and how—can bring a variety of bird species to your yard throughout the winter season. Having said that, though, Schlarbaum urges birders to avoid the ‘variety’ bird seed mixes. “There’s too much waste,” he said, of the mixes, such as those heavy on millet and cracked corn. “They don’t do well attracting the more desirable species that many people want; the cardinals, chickadees, titmice, nuthatches and more.”

Black oil sunflower seed gets top marks from most wildlife officials. “That’ll get the widest range of birds,” offers Schlarbaum. “Even downy and hairy woodpeckers will go for it. If you have a problem with squirrels, you might try safflower seeds.” From there, specific food sources in separate feeders only increase your outdoor show. Schlarbaum suggests suet for woodpeckers; niger thistle for goldfinches and other cold weather finches, and peanuts for tufted titmice. Also essential is water. Most birding experts agree that an open source of water during sub-freezing weather is a magnet for birds. Experts recommend you get a heating element specifically for use with a birdbath. Wilson says the cost to run one is about \$3 a month.

The Raptor Show

Southerly winds are also blowing birds of prey through Iowa. The late September Hawk Watch at Effigy Mounds in northeast Iowa is perhaps the biggest event in eastern Iowa, but the raptor watch doesn’t stop there.

“You’re likely to see sharp-shinned hawks and Coopers hawks right now,” forecasts wildlife technician Pat Schlarbaum, from the DNR’s wildlife diversity headquarters near Boone. “Eagles generally need a little more cold up north before they start moving into Iowa. Rough-legged hawks and snowy owls are early migrants; telling you what winter holds in store, as they show up.”

Some backyard birders see a hawk as a mixed blessing at best...and a serious problem at worst. Personally, I see it as another bird utilizing the feeder; just as dozens or hundreds of songbirds do. When the songbirds suspiciously disappear in an instant, I stop and watch closely. Occasionally, a shadow floats across the yard. Sometimes, the

hawk wings in to take a break on a bare upper branch. Within 15 minutes after a hawk snatches a meal, the feeder is back to normal. "If you prefer to discourage a bird of prey from hanging around, discontinue feeding for a couple days," suggests Schlarbaum. "The hawk will move on, and the songbirds will return."

SAFETY STRESSED TO PHEASANT HUNTERS

DES MOINES – Iowa's pheasant season is less than two weeks away and hunters planning to hunt opening weekend should be ready for lots of company. With more than 175,000 hunters expected in Iowa fields, safety will play a vital part in planning the hunt.

Rod Slings, recreational safety program supervisor for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, has spent the better part of his 30-year career teaching hunter safety classes and investigation hunting related injuries.

"I know opening day of pheasant season can be an exciting time, especially with the excellent bird numbers here in Iowa, but hunters need to plan their hunt, and stick with that plan," he said. "The ultimate goal of every hunt is for everyone to get home safely. Although Iowa law does not require blaze orange for upland game hunting, I can't stress enough the importance of wearing blaze orange by every member in the group. A lot of injuries could have been avoided if hunters simply wore blaze orange."

The hunting plan lets every hunter in the group know how the hunt will take place and each hunters roll in it. Each person will have certain responsibilities in the hunt and that roll should be outlined before heading out to the field.

"The majority of hunting related injuries happens during the first two weeks of pheasant season and the majority of those incidents happen when hunters swing their gun and shoot outside their zone of fire," he said. "The zone of fire is basically a 45 degree area in front of each hunter. When a pheasant gets up, who's ever zone it is in, that person has the shot. A lot of the injuries occur when hunters try to take a bird outside their zone of fire. When in deep cover, such as standing corn or tall grasses, call out to let your hunting companions know where you are."

Slings said hunters should be talking to the landowner of the property they plan to hunt to make sure they have permission, and to see if anyone else has access to the property.

"My best advice is to receive written permission from the landowner that states you are allowed on the property and to have the property boundary spelled out so you don't cross over into another person's land," Slings said. "Don't assume that if you had

permission to hunt last year, that you have permission to hunt the same land this year. That should all be part of your hunting plan.”

For more information, contact Slings at 515-281-8652.

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HITCHCOCK NATURE AREA DESIGNATED IMPORTANT BIRD AREA

POTTAWATTAMIE COUNTY – Forty Important Bird Areas (IBAs), have been identified In Iowa, and each is a part of a network of some 700 IBAs in 46 states, and a global network of more than 8,000 IBAs in 132 nations.

Hitchcock Nature Area in Pottawattamie County was dedicated as an IBA during the Iowa Ornithologists’ Union’s annual fall meeting Oct. 10, and with that, becomes the first official IBA in Iowa. On-site IBA dedication ceremonies are also being planned for George Wyth State Park/Hartman Reserve Complex and the Cedar Valley Nature Trail in Blackhawk County; and the Wickiup Hill Nature Center/Cedar River Complex in Linn County. Dedication ceremonies will also take place at other Iowa IBAs in the future.

National Audubon’s Important Bird Areas Program in Iowa is coordinated by Iowa Audubon staff member Ric Zarwell. A technical committee is chaired by Dr. Jim Dinsmore, retired Iowa State University Professor and Iowa’s leading ornithologist, along with DNR Wildlife Diversity Program staff and several of the state’s most knowledgeable birdwatchers. This committee has identified 37 species of birds experiencing serious population declines in Iowa. A habitat supporting one or more of these species during their annual life cycle qualifies for IBA recognition and priority conservation treatment. Birdwatchers throughout Iowa have been directly involved in nominating habitats for the IBA Program. Additional details about this bird conservation program can be viewed at www.iowabirds.org/IBA .

Audubon Iowa’s IBA Program is funded in part through the Iowa DNR’s Wildlife Diversity Program, with monies from the federal Wildlife Conservation and Restoration (WCR) grant program.

For more details, contact: Ric Zarwell, Audubon Iowa’s IBA Coordinator, at zarxzar@salamander.com.

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TABLE IS SET FOR MUCH-IMPROVED UPLAND GAME HUNTING

DES MOINES – The table is set for one of Iowa's best upland game hunting seasons in recent years. Pheasant numbers are up substantially, rabbit numbers are the highest in more than a decade, quail numbers rose slightly and partridge remained steady.

Ring-necked Pheasants

The 2003 August Upland Wildlife Roadside Survey, conducted by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), indicates pheasant populations across Iowa increased 40 percent when compared to last year, said Todd Bogenschutz, IDNR's Upland Wildlife Research Biologist. On this year's roadside counts DNR staff counted 46 birds per route, which is Iowa's highest statewide pheasant count since 1994.

Populations increased in all regions of the state this year, with the largest increases reported in northwest, northeast, southwest and south-central regions, however the best bird densities were reported from central, northwest and north-central regions. Based on this year's statewide population index, Iowa pheasant hunters should harvest between 1.18 and 1.38 million roosters this fall. Pheasant hunters in most of northern and central Iowa should have their best season in almost 10 years, with hunters in other parts of Iowa seeing improved bird densities compared to the last three to five seasons.

This year's count shows the remarkable resiliency our pheasants have when Mother Nature smiles on Iowa said Bogenschutz. This year's statewide average of 46 birds/route represents a 229 percent increase over the all time low count of 13.9 birds/route recorded only two years ago in 2001. The recovery of Iowa's pheasant population from the devastating winter of 2000 is the result of two mild winters and two favorable nesting seasons back-to-back in 2002 and 2003.

The 2003 pheasant hunting season runs from Oct. 25 through Jan. 10, 2004. Legal shooting hours are 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. The daily bag limit is three roosters, with a possession limit of 12. Those interested in looking at the full roadside report can download it from the department's webpage under the upland game section at www.iowadnr.com.

Partridge, Quail and Rabbits

The mild winter and dry spring also led to increases in quail and rabbit populations in 2003, while gray partridge populations remained similar to last year. The best areas for partridge appeared to be northwest and central Iowa. Quail populations increased 135 percent when compared to 2003, but Bogenschutz notes quail numbers still remain well below their long-term average. Quail hunters should find some good pockets of quail in parts of southern Iowa along the Missouri border. The 2003-04 partridge season opened Oct. 11, while the quail season opens on Oct. 25. Both seasons close Jan. 31, 2004. The daily bag limit for each species is eight birds of either sex with a possession limit of 16. Shooting hours are 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Iowa's cottontail population also responded to the mild winter, as counts increased 65 percent in 2003. This is Iowa's highest rabbit count in 13 years and the third highest count ever recorded since the survey was standardized in 1962. Rabbit hunters should

find very huntable rabbit populations in parts of the southern third of the state. Iowa's rabbit season opened Sept. 1 and closes Feb. 28, 2004. The bag limit is 10 daily, with 20 in possession. Shooting hours are from sunrise to sunset. Hunters wanting more information on this year's upland survey or hunting season can visit the Iowa DNR's website at www.iowadnr.com to view the entire report.